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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 001489

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STATE FOR NEA/IPA AND NEA/MAG (HOPKINS AND HARRIS)

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: THE PNG'ING OF SUHA ARAFAT: MANY RUMORS, FEW FACTS

REF: A. IIR 6 897 0136 07 (NOTALS)

[¶B.](#) 06 TUNIS 2570

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶1.](#) (C/NF) Summary: The GOT's decision last summer to revoke Suha Arafat's Tunisian citizenship, which had only been granted less than a year earlier, made international headlines. Since the appearance of the official register notice on August 7, the chattering class in Tunisia has not ceased to speculate about the reasons behind the decision. In a mid-October telcon with Ambassador Godec, Mrs. Arafat attributed her ouster to the personal animus of First Lady Leila Ben Ali, following a dispute over the forced closure of the Bouebdelli School, a well-respected private school. Had it remained open, the Bouebdelli School would have represented serious competition to the new Carthage International School, a joint venture between the two First Ladies. It is doubtful that we will ever know all of the facts in this affair, but the stories of corruption swirling around the Carthage International School have a ring of truth to them. Meanwhile, Mrs. Arafat was not shy in sharing with the Ambassador stinging criticism of President Ben Ali, the First Lady, and the web of corruption that she says surrounds them. End Summary.

Easy Come, Easy Go

[¶12.](#) (C) On August 7, the GOT's Official Journal contained a one-sentence announcement of decree number 2007-1976 of August 2, 2007, revoking the citizenship of Suha Arafat, wife of the late Palestinian Authority President Yassir Arafat. As reported Ref B, the GOT had only granted Tunisian nationality, by naturalization, to Mrs. Arafat and her 12 year-old daughter Zahwa in September, 2006. (Note: The GOT did not revoke the citizenship of Mrs. Arafat's daughter. End Note.) The GOT's decision to revoke the citizenship of Mrs. Arafat came without warning. In an early July telcon with the Ambassador, Mrs. Arafat gave no indication that anything was amiss. Indeed, she indicated that she would like to meet with the Ambassador when she returned from her vacation in Malta later in the summer. Nor were there any distress signals in Ref A conversation with Mrs. Arafat, which also took place in early summer.

[¶13.](#) (C/NF) In a mid-October telcon with the Ambassador, Ms. Arafat blamed her ouster on the personal animus of First Lady Leila Ben Ali. "I can't believe what she's has done to me," Arafat exclaimed, "I've lost everything!" She charged that all of her properties in Tunisia had been confiscated, even by falsifying documents transferring ownership. (Note: It is rumored that Mrs. Arafat had invested -- and lost -- some 2.5 million euros in the Carthage International School. End

Note.) In addition, she said, her friends and colleagues in Tunisia, including her banker, had also come under pressure. "Anyone who supports me is punished."

But, Why?: The School Theory, Version I

14. (C/NF) Mrs. Arafat attributed her ouster to her falling out with First Lady Leila Ben Ali over the Carthage International School, a new, private, for-profit school, of which they had been co-owners. According to Mrs. Arafat's version of events, the dispute stemmed from Leila Ben Ali's decision to force the closure of the Bouebdelli school (also known as by the name of its parent group, Le Fondation Louis Pasteur), a highly respected private school, from which many of Tunisia's elite have graduated. (Note: The Bouebdelli school was notified in mid-May that the Minister of Education had ordered it to close, ostensibly for failure to comply with registration regulations. Public outcry ensued, fueled in part by a petition and letter-writing campaign organized by parents of Bouebdelli schoolchildren. Many local and international media reports criticized the decision to close the school as a flagrant attempt to stifle potential competition of the International School of Carthage. The fact that parents of Bouebdelli schoolchildren were encouraged to enroll their children at the Carthage school only served to fuel these charges, as did the August 29 Presidential decree in which President Ben Ali granted 1,794,600 Tunisian Dinars (approximately US \$ 1.5 million) to the Carthage School, an estimated 25 percent of its operating budget.)

15. (C/NF) Mrs. Arafat asserted that Leila Ben Ali had

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overreached in the decision to force the Bouebdelli School to close. She claimed that she had tried to convince the Tunisian First Lady that "what we are doing is unethical," and that competition ultimately would be healthy for the new school. Their arguments over this issue continued to escalate, according to Mrs. Arafat, culminating in the decision to revoke her citizenship while she was on vacation in Malta. Mrs. Arafat told the Ambassador that she intends to remain in Malta, where her brother serves as Palestinian Ambassador, but that she hopes to spend Christmas in the Palestinian Territories.

But Why?: Version II of the School Theory

16. (C/NF) Other rumors have circulated with a different spin on the school story. According to this theory, it was Mrs. Arafat who overreached, not Leila Ben Ali. Specifically, it is said that Mrs. Arafat convinced the Ministry of Education to force the closure of the Bouebdelli School. She reportedly did so by invoking the name of Mrs. Ben Ali. Critically, though, according to this theory, Leila Ben Ali was not aware that her name was being invoked. Thus, the Tunisian First Lady was incensed when she learned about the school's closure -- and her alleged role in that decision -- in the highly critical pieces in the local and international media. (Comment: The fact that the Bouebdelli School did not reopen, even after the revocation of Suha Arafat's citizenship, would seem to cast doubt on the accuracy of this theory. End Comment.)

But Why?: An Array of Other Theories

17. (C/NF) Plenty of other theories have stoked the rumor mill in the Suha Arafat affair. One well-connected Palestinian resident in Tunisia told EmbOff that what sealed Mrs. Arafat's fate was that on a recent visit to Tripoli, she had

asked Libyan Leader Qaddafi for money. Qaddafi had readily provided a hand-out, but he reportedly subsequently called President Ben Ali to chastise him for failing to provide adequately for the widow of the late Palestinian President. Ben Ali's acute embarrassment, so the story goes, quickly turned to wrath. It was not long before Mrs. Arafat's citizenship was revoked. Another theory holds that Suha Arafat was ousted because she had absconded with a significant amount of the first family's assets. Finally, in the face of persistent rumors that Mrs. Arafat had secretly married Belhassen Trabelsi, brother of the Tunisian First Lady, some commentators chalked up the whole ordeal to the failure of that relationship.

Scathing Commentary on the First Family

¶8. (C/NF) No doubt as a result of her tribulations, Mrs. Arafat was not shy about sharing with the Ambassador her negative impressions of President Ben Ali, his wife, and her family members, whom, she said, collectively represent a web of corruption. Drawing on her close contact with the first family over the past several years, she made several allegations, among them the following:

- President Ben Ali remains weakened by his battle with cancer (NFI);
- President Ben Ali spends all his time playing with his son and following him around the residence;
- President Ben Ali simply does what his wife asks him to do;
- Leila Ben Ali and her family are stealing everything of value in the country;
- Leila Ben Ali believes that she will succeed her husband as President of Tunisia;
- The members of Ben Ali's extended family can do whatever they want with impunity, including the falsification of documents;
- Leila Ben Ali dropped the American curriculum that had been planned for the Carthage school because she fundamentally wants nothing to do with Americans.

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Comment

¶9. (C/NF) It is doubtful that we will ever know all of the facts in the Suha Arafat affair, or, for that matter in the Bouebdelli School/Carthage International School matter. Clearly, having been stripped of her Tunisian citizenship and deprived of her properties here, Suha Arafat has an ax to grind with the Ben Ali clan, so her allegations must be taken with a big grain of salt. Although difficult to prove, there is a certain ring of truth to the stories of corruption swirling around the school issue. While it is not clear who was behind the Bouebdelli closure, the ready-made pool of students for whom Bouebdelli was no longer an option was certainly convenient for filling the classrooms in the Carthage School's opening year. Indeed, during a mid-September visit to the Carthage School, MgmtCouns learned that the school is filled to capacity. Beyond that, no school in recent memory has been constructed so quickly, had municipally provided access roads, street signs, and traffic lights installed so efficiently, or had such ease in getting certified (although it has not yet received the French accreditation the Bouebdelli School had). Nor is it common practice for the GOT to so generously subsidize a for-profit educational institution. Finally, it must be noted that the

school affair, while rather blatant, is not an isolated case of favoritism and corruption. We will continue to follow this issue and report septel on other corruption charges.

End Comment.

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